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FRENCH ATTITUDES TOWARD THE BRITISH
(Spring, 1942)

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Reliable appraisal of the true attitudinal situation in France could be achieved only by some form of opinion interviews sampling the population. This methodological ideal cannot, of course, be realized. The present report represents a very rapid survey of the sources of information available to COI - confidential reports from France, reports of interviews from the Division of Oral Intelligence, the State Department cables, intercepts, newspapers, and interviews with informed persons in Washington. The conclusions are but an estimate of attitudes, the criterion for which has been apparent consensus in the data.

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BACKGROUND

Before 1914

Basic political antagonisms between France and England tend to be obscured by the prominence of Anglo-French collaboration in 1914-18 and 1939-40. France and England fought each other in the 100 Years War, the 7 Years War, and in the Napoleonic Wars; and the memories of Joan of Arc burned by the British, of French colonial outposts in Asia and North America seized by the British in the 18th century, and of the French defeats at the hands of the British at Trafalgar and Waterloo are not entirely dead.

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Indeed, France shares with Germany many of the basic resentments and "sensitive spots" towards the inhabitants of the British Isles: resentment at British "intervention" in continental affairs solely for her own "interest," resentment at British naval superiority, resentment at Britain's world empire which might have been French or German. British "threats" to the French navy and empire, therefore, cause particularly acute reactions in France. These resentments have given rise to many of the same derogatory attitudes towards the English in both France and Germany: the English are "a nation of shopkeepers," mercenary, selfish, hypocritical, unmilitary, snobbish, fundamentally uncultured and boorish. Some of these attitudes are reflected in G. J. Renier's clever satire, The English: Are They Human? (original in French). Finally, it is true both of France and of Germany that anti-British resentment and contempt are combined with considerable genuine admiration, and even some secret envy of British accomplishments.

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1914-1940

French attitudes toward the British generated by the conflicts of interest since 1914 can be better understood against this background. There is considerable French

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feeling that the British mismanaged the peace negotiations in 1918-19 - or rather prevented the French from managing them correctly - and that therefore the British, through their "appeasement" tactics, are really responsible for the rise of Hitler and the outbreak of World War II. Even though responsibility for this second war may be divided, the French believe the British were certainly inadequately prepared and therefore had no moral right to "urge" war upon the French, who were equally unprepared but far less eager to fight. On top of all this came the debacle of May-June 1940, culminating in the British evacuation of the continent at Dunkirk.

Since 1940

Like all political or military events of far-reaching significance, "Dunkirk" has acquired in the last two years dramatic meanings of considerable importance in the political thinking of the nations involved. For many Frenchmen the British withdrawal has come to mean three things: the ultimate "betrayal" of one ally by another, the longed-for escape from the Nazis denied to the brave French who were left behind,* and the successful continuation of a struggle

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* One widespread rumor reported by Genevieve Tabouis alleges that French soldiers seeking places on British evacuation vessels were shot to make room for Britishers.

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which the French, perhaps mistakenly, regarded as hopeless. With reference to the last point a recent arrival from France has stated: "It is this which the Frenchman can never forgive the Englishmen: he hates him as the revealer of his own (the Frenchman's) weakness and national ignominy."

For these Frenchmen who did not give up hope, Dunkirk meant the saving of valuable resources to be used in the ultimate revenge. The crucial factor was the Frenchman's own estimate of the chances of victory. If he regarded the Nazi conquest as final, then he could only regard the British (and later the United States) as misguided prolongers of his own misery by pointlessly postponing the ultimate return to peace and prosperity. Until he saw tangible evidence of Allied power to sway the tide of battle the other way - that is, to show concrete signs of helping them, the Frenchman was going to remain skeptical regarding British intentions.

It is this sort of consideration which has determined French reactions to British "attacks on French interests" since the spring of 1940: the disabling of the units of the French fleet at Oran, the abortive assault on Dakar, the military occupation of Syria, the bombing of French industrial plants working for the Nazis, the commando raid on St. Nazaire, and the taking over of Madagascar.

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Apparently, since the entry of the United States into the war, the attitude toward England has been more tolerant, for America is regarded as a French protector in the event of ultimate political conflicts with England.

CURRENT ATTITUDES

Significant Events

Three events of significance in the determination of French attitudes toward the British have occurred during the past three months - namely, the RAF raids on Paris, the British commando attack on St. Nazaire, and the occupation of Madagascar. What has been the reaction of the French people to these events?

The Paris Raids. The bombing of the Paris industrial plants was tangible evidence of British striking power. Certain French comments on the raids stressed the skill with which the RAF hit only factory targets which were known to be working for the Nazis, and damaged them badly. Although saddened by the casualties, the French, by and large, understood the military necessity for the actions. Some "anti-capitalist" sentiment was gratified by the destruction of Renault's property. In the case of the Poissy raids even the official press admitted that the main target was a factory working for the Germans. In

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general, the efforts of the press to work up an anti-British rage over these bombings were a failure; England was in most sources felt to be justified both morally and legally. The public funerals for the raid victims left the people apathetic, or in some cases even provoked anti-German rather than anti-British sentiments, the people blaming the raids on the presence of the Germans.

The intensity of anti-British feeling and the reported gravity of the casualties seemed to increase with distance from Paris, revealing the effect of rumor and of Nazi-inspired accounts in the official press and radio. As a consequence, the inhabitants of Occupied France responded more favorably to the British in this event than did the people of the Unoccupied zone.

The St. Nazaire Commando Raid. In the case of the St. Nazaire raid, it is reliably reported through official channels that some 500 Frenchmen were killed siding with the British forces, which would mean active military participation of almost ten per cent of the nativepopulation, who in that part of France are held to be markedly pro-British. This degree of active support of the British action seems to indicate a willingness to aid concrete Allied military efforts - a striking contrast to the frequently reported "apathy" of the French populace.

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The Occupation of Madagascar. The precedent of Indo-China strengthened, in the minds of many Frenchmen, Allied justification for the protective occupation of Madagascar. American assurances about the island's eventual return to France after the war, as well as the absence of De Gaullist forces, contributed to the relatively mild reaction in France, despite frantic protests in the press.

Attitudes of Different Groups

The various sources consulted tend to suggest that for both zones of France the leading "collaborateurs," and therefore, for the most part, the anti-British, are to be found among the industrial, aristocratic, and bourgeois classes, and the intellectuals who have been converted to the New Order. In addition, there are the military conservatives and reactionaries, whose two principal arguments for collaboration are: (a) Petain, a man of integrity, can do no dishonorable thing to disgrace France; and (b) France's defeat was due primarily to political divisions; a British victory will bring back the former political regime with its politicians and corruption; therefore, from a moral point of view, a German victory, despite the sacrifices, is preferable. This argument demonstrates the extent to which the problem

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of internal policy takes precedence for the French people over that of external policy.

The anti-British attitude of the upper classes appears to stem somewhat from jealousy and injured pride, but also from a fear of the return of the Popular Front, or of communism.

Pro-British and pro-De Gaulle attitudes gather their major strengths in the lower classes. According to one observer, the most actively pro-British sectors of the population include the young officers of both army and navy; the young intellectuals - especially college students; most French women - the most courageous men having been detained in German prison camps; and the hundred thousand French Jews.

The French Navy officers appear to be anti-British, and it is alleged that for this reason Darlan has entrusted to them many important jobs in the police administration. The crews, on the other hand, being mostly Bretons, with a long sea-faring tradition and close contact with the English, appear to admire the British navy and to be in general quite pro-British.

French colonial officials, especially those now in France, appear to resemble the Auslandsdeutsche, in that they overcompensate for their national insecurity by developing an exaggerated nationalism. The spread of the

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Free French movement indicates that there are exceptions to this, but the reality of resistance to British moves in Dakar, Syria, and Madagascar cannot be overlooked. Eyewitness reports from Dakar express the belief that the military authorities there would obey any order from Vichy that could be construed as coming from Petain, that the British are scorned for their "hit and run" attack of 1940, that De Gaulle is popular neither as a symbol nor as a person, and that fear of unrest among the 15,000,000 natives is an important factor in the background. The recent opening of an "Imperial Fortnight" under pro-Axis sponsorship seeks to exploit this minority viewpoint for purposes of stirring up anti-British sentiment. However, colonial opinion is strikingly more favorable to the United States.

De Gaulle

The British association with De Gaulle has been unfortunate for their cause in France. As a dissident officer, continuing the fight of France, he is praised; as a political figure, he is subjected t o blame and ridicule. So many of the political satellites associated with the Fall of France have attached themselves to De Gaulle abroad, that many people fear a British success which might bring him and his followers into political power. French

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troops who have returned from Syria are reported to be bitterly anti-British, and even more bitterly anti-De Gaulle.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN OCCUPIED AND UNOCCUPIED FRANCE

From more than 500 intercepted letters from France to the Western Hemisphere (between November 15 and April 15, 1942), 106 were selected for the present study. Those which expressed attitudes hostile or favorable toward Britain were rated on an eleven point scale, with the middle of the scale (point "5") representing a neutral attitude, and the extremes pro-British (point "10") and anti-British (point "0") attitudes.

When the results were tabulated and summarized, a mean rating of 6.69 was found for the Occupied Zone (46 intercepts), and for the Unoccupied Zone (60 intercepts) a rating of 3.98. This would suggest that the people of Occupied France are more pro-British than those of Unoccupied France. This finding is in conformity with the opinions held by various informed observers, and also with the data derived from other sources used in the present study.

With Laval's advent to power, many of the previous differences of opinion with regard to British war aims have tended to disappear between the two zones. The

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French no longer have three potential ~~objects of loyalty~~ (Paris, Vichy, De Gaulle), but only two -- insofar, that is, as Vichy tends to approximate Paris. Many observers, therefore, feel that French attitudes are approaching a crisis, in that the confusion created by the Nazi "zone" policy is being displaced by a feeling of increased urgency and by clearer decisions either to collaborate or to resist more actively.

DIFFERENTIATION OF BRITISH ROLES

In conclusion it should be stressed that "pro-British" or "anti-British" attitudes vary with the aspect of "British" which is being considered. Five major British roles can be distinguished:

1. <u>The BBC as a non-Axis source of information</u>. There seems to be a universally favorable attitude here, impaired only by resentment at occasional British radio attacks on French politics and expecially on the person of the aged and respected Marshall. When that occurs the BBC is looked upon, not as "giving news", but as "butting in" in French affairs. Listening to the BBC (which is sufficiently widespread to call forth rebukes from the Paris radio and to be the subject of

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many jokes) may reveal a desire for enlightenment rather than necessarily any desire to aid the British actively, although favorable reaction to the BBC undoubtedly encourages favorable opinion regarding the British in general.

2. Britain as an ally of 1939-40. The attitude here is a mixture of resentment, envy, and hope for the future. It has been discussed above.

3. Britain as a potential future ally. In this respect there has been a marked change since the German reversals in Russia, the entry of the U.S., and the opening of the heavy R.A.F. offensive of this spring. This attitude may be expected to vary in direct proportion to the success of Allied military plans. Whether or not the French like Britain, most of them realize that only an Allied victory can restore France's opportunity to develop as a free nation. If Britain can throw the Nazis out without interfering in French national affairs, well and good. The French are still waiting to be shown that this is possible. De Gaulle's location in London is a disturbing factor.

4. Britain as guardian of Europe and of world peace. With the United States as a counterweight to

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British influence, the French will favor British aims; but they will manifest considerable skepticism, distrustfulness, and even fear, especially for their empire. The United States should therefore take pains to reassure France: (a) that her national autonomy will be respected, (b) that her empire will be preserved, (c) that she may retain a republican form of government, and (d) that she will be protected against communism.

5. The British as a nation. French attitudes combine envy and contempt, tempered by fear of the Germans, with some enthusiastic respect. This ambivalence in the French attitude toward the British -- as a people or as a political rival, and as a factor in ridding French soil of the Nazis -- is illustrated by the remark made by an American observer: "Eighty per cent of the French people want the British to win, and most of the other twenty per cent want the 'damned British pigs' to win." In this respect there is a certain parallel with Anglo-American attitudes toward Russia -- in both cases certain political reservations are willingly shelved for the sake of military necessity.

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